SOUTH AFRICA'S DEMOCRATIC ELECTIONS: THE UN'S OBSERVER ROLE

South Africa's first non-racial, democratic elections will be among the most closely watched and carefully monitored elections in history. The United Nations Observer Mission in South Africa (UNOMSA) has helped to set up a complex network to monitor the electoral process to maximize the chances of a successful transition to democracy. It draws on the experience of the many elections that the United Nations has monitored in the past ten years.

The UNOMSA contingent, which is expected to reach approximately 1,800 persons by the elections, along with approximately 900 international observers appointed by foreign Governments and international organizations, are being deployed across the country as South Africans prepare to cast their ballots on 26, 27 and 28 April.

While the nationwide elections for a new National Parliament represent only one step in the medium-term plan to produce a permanent constitution by 1996, there is great concern that they be as inclusive and as free and fair as possible. The elections are seen as a crucial step towards the final dismantling of apartheid and initiating the ground-up construction of a democratic, non-racial society.

SOUTH AFRICANS ARE IN CHARGE

The organizational tasks facing South African electoral officials are clearly enormous. Valid identity documents or temporary voting cards will have to be issued to more than 22 million eligible voters, more than five times the number taking part in any previous election in the country.

For the first time in South African history, all citizens 18 years of age or older are entitled to vote. Each voter will, in fact, cast two ballots, which will be used to calculate the number of seats allocated to each party in the national and provincial legislatures, according to a system of proportional representation. South Africans will elect 400 members to the National Assembly and 424 members of provincial legislatures. The provincial legislatures will, in turn, elect 90 senators. The new National Assembly and Senate, sitting together, will form the Constitutional Assembly, which will have the task of adopting a new constitution within two years.

South Africa's Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) is responsible for organizing, administering and monitoring all aspects of the elections and verifying whether they are free and fair.

The electoral role of UNOMSA, which began its work in South Africa in 1992, is to observe all aspects of the electoral process and coordinate the deployment of the three other international observer missions from the Commonwealth, the European Union and the Organization of African Unity (OAU), as well as those appointed by Governments and who come under the UN umbrella.

On the basis of facts gathered by international observers and technical staff, UNOMSA will report to the electoral authorities on complaints, irregularities and incidents of interference that come to its attention. As appropriate, it will ask electoral authorities to take remedial action. After the elections, the four international observer missions will issue a joint statement that reflects their consensual assessment of the electoral process.

BACKGROUND

The United Nations has maintained a presence in South Africa since September 1992, when an initial 50 observers under UNOMSA were deployed by UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali, pursuant to Security Council resolution 772 (1992). That resolution expressed the Council's determination to help South Africans reduce the level of political violence and authorized UNOMSA to

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work to strengthen the structures under the National Peace Accord and to help remove obstacles to multi-party negotiations on the elections.

Since then, UN observer teams have been deployed in all regions designated in the National Peace Accord. As a key part of their assignment, they have established contacts with all sectors of South Africa's diverse society in order to facilitate communications between communities, government officials, the security forces and the peace structures. Their field reports also help the Chief of Mission in her interventions with senior officials of the Government, the security forces, political organizations and other entities to bring potential flashpoints to the attention of decision makers and to help avert or defuse crises.

As UNOMSA is a completely civilian mission, with no military or police component, the personal security of UN observers depends mostly on their own good judgement and the good will of the South African communities in which they will work.

UNOMSA'S ELECTORAL ROLE

UNOMSA's specific role in the elections grew out of a decision of South Africa's Transitional Executive Council (TEC) at its first meeting in December 1993. At that meeting, the TEC endorsed a resolution of the Multi-party Negotiating Council in which the Council requested that the United Nations provide international observers to monitor the electoral process and to coordinate the activities of the international observer missions.

In response, the United Nations Secretary-General immediately appointed Mr. Lakhdar Brahimi as his Special Representative for South Africa. Ms. Angela King, who served as UNOMSA's Chief of Mission from its initial deployment in 1992, is currently Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General.

UNOMSA has two operating arms: a Peace Promotion Division and an Electoral Division. Three coordinating bodies have been established: a Coordinating Committee, composed of the heads of the four international observer missions; a Technical Task Force, to oversee all technical electoral matters; and the Joint Operations Unit, made up of representatives of the OAU and Commonwealth Observer Missions, chaired by the UN, to coordinate logistical and training support for international observers. The General Assembly has approved a total of US $38.9 million for UNOMSA operations until 31 July 1994, to be financed from the UN regular budget as activities of an extraordinary nature related to the maintenance of international peace and security.

CONTACT AT ALL LEVELS

UNOMSA's Technical Task Force, made up of the Chief Electoral Officers of each observer mission and chaired by the Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary-General or by the Director of UNOMSA's Electoral Division, liaises with the IEC and guides the collection and analysis of data on the electoral process.

The Joint Operations Unit is the "nerve centre" of the coordination effort, staffed by liaison officers from each mission and supported by computer programmers, a demographer, a cartographer and logistics personnel. These mechanisms are intended to ensure that international observers are deployed effectively and receive the necessary support. Provincial Logistical Officers, who serve as Joint Operations Unit focal points in the field, are deployed in Pietersburg, Nelspruit, Durban, Klerksdorp, Bloemfontein, Kimberley, Port Elizabeth and Cape Town, as well as Johannesburg.

The Joint Operations Unit will build on the practical coordination arrangements already established by UNOMSA in collaboration with the other international observer missions. It will develop common forms for observing events and for training and briefing observers, and will organize data banks as well as logistical support for observers in the field.

WATCHING THE ELECTIONS

In efforts to ensure that South Africans can participate fully in the electoral process, UNOMSA's

Peace Promotion Division has set up nine provincial offices out of which observer teams monitor rallies and other public events and investigate instances of intimidation and related complaints.

UNOMSA observers will file reports on the performance to the IEC in its efforts to ensure free and fair elections. They will also observe and report on the conduct of political parties, the security forces and others involved in the electoral process, such as organizations engaged in voter education. Electoral monitors appointed by the IEC will facilitate the cross-verification of information gathered by the international observers themselves.

Similarly, UN observers will report on how the security forces complied with the requirements of the relevant laws and decisions of the TEC. They will also determine whether the provisions of the Acts establishing the Independent Media Commission and the Independent Broadcasting Authority were satisfactorily observed and whether the voter education efforts of the electoral authorities have been sufficient. Special attention is being given to observing measures to ensure that women are adequately informed and free to cast their votes.

During the actual elections, UNOMSA observers will help determine whether voters enjoy free access to voting stations, whether the secrecy of the vote has been guaranteed and that ballot boxes are properly sealed, protected and transported. They will also witness the counting of the ballots and the communication of the results to the IEC by counting stations throughout the country.

Standardized questionnaires for recording observers' assessments of the electoral process are being prepared by the Operations Analysis Section in consultation with the other three international observer missions. These questionnaires will maximize the comparability of data gathered in the field. Operational circulars have been issued on the overall mandate of the mission and its structure, on criteria for observing the issuance of temporary voting cards, on voter education, on voting station locations and on electoral adjudication procedures.

OBSERVING ELECTORAL ADJUDICATION

UNOMSA's adjudication section has developed guidelines for observing how the IEC deals with violations of the Electoral Act and the code of conduct for political parties. The section, assisted by observers in the field, will follow the IEC's systems of mediation and the way its tribunals adjudicate electoral disputes. The adjudication section will share its findings with the IEC and offer advice, but only the IEC will have the authority to take action regarding issues brought to its attention.

Locating, staffing and outfitting voting stations is a major concern of the IEC. On 26 March, a provisional list of 5,734 voting stations was published. The list will be finalized closer to the election date and is likely to total around 8,000 sites. In addition, mobile voting stations will be deployed in some areas. UNOMSA is closely following the work of the IEC as it designates sites for voting stations. The location of the voting stations will be a crucial factor, both for voters and for the deployment of international observers.

UN VOLUNTEERS

On 18 March, 200 United Nations Volunteers (UNVs) from 44 countries joined UNOMSA. They will serve as ground-level support in advance of the larger complement of UN observers arriving in April. Fifty-five per cent of the UNVs are nationals of African countries and the remainder are from other developing and industrialized countries.

They will be joined by almost 1,300 UN observers deployed to cover the election itself. Observers from other intergovernmental organizations and individual countries are expected to bring the total number of international observers to around 2,300.

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